

The Ten Gifts to Give Your Child
A synopsis of
Dr. Ben Bissell's "Building Self Esteem: The Ten Gifts to Give Your Child"

At this time of the year, it seems appropriate to reflect on what is most important for us to give our children. After twenty one years as a parent and eighteen years in parent education, I continue to find Dr. Ben Bissell's "Building Self Esteem: The Ten Gifts to Give Your Child" an very valuable tool. He believes that if we give our children these ten gifts they will develop a healthy self-esteem. I have found the gifts also provided guidance on discipline and communication. The following is a brief synopsis of those gifts.

Dr. Bissell says that children need "**A Good Name**". He's talking about the nicknames we give children. Boys are often referred to as "little devils" or girls are called "chatterboxes". However unintentionally, these names indicate that we expect a certain behavior. Take the quiet child who is observed as being shy or introverted. When the child hears that label, he begins to believe that he is shy and then acts according to this expectation. Why not label that child a "thinker" and give him the opportunity to become just that.

This doesn't just relate to the nicknames. For example, society has deemed the second year the "terrible twos". What if we viewed that time as the "year of independence" and applauded our children's steps toward each accomplishment. Maybe we could then rename that time the "terrific twos". What if we viewed our children as "determined" instead of "stubborn"; or, saw the child who is into everything as "creative" rather than "messy". In young children, we often see their storytelling as "lies" and squash their wonderful imagination. How many Shakespeares or Wordworths have been lost by our good intentions?

In discussing the second gift, Dr. Ben Bissell points out that we should **Listen to Our Children**. He says they 'need a lot more listening to and not as much talking to'. As a parent, it is hard not to share the benefit of our experience and wisdom. However children often need to learn for themselves. When we stop and listen, we are saying that what our child thinks is important. We also get a different point of view. Listening not only builds self-esteem, it also encourages children to develop their thinking skills. As we listen we are saying that they are capable of generating their own ideas. We are also providing an opportunity for them to try out their ideas on others.

Listening is important in the development of trust between us and our children. As adults, we stop talking if someone "puts us down" or isn't listening to our ideas. Children respond in the same way. If we want teenagers who will come to us with problems and questions, then we must build a foundation of listening in the early years.

Children's emotional development is greatly enhanced when we are available to listen to their concerns and provide guidance. By having permission to express what they are feeling, they can in turn begin to identify what the feeling is, and the appropriate

expression of that feeling. In our fast paced society, it is even more important that children have the ability to resolve conflict through words and not physical means.

Dr. Bissell recommends **Letting Children Make Decisions**. But when are they ready to make decisions? And how do they learn the skills needed to make good decisions? Children learn ‘decision making’ by being given the opportunity to make decisions, to express their feelings and thoughts, and by being included in family discussions. If we ask for their input, they begin to feel special. They feel that their thoughts and feelings are important, and therefore, so are they. It is never too early to give children the opportunity to make decisions. This is done by giving them choices. Ask if they want peas or carrots for dinner, and then let them decide. Do they want to brush their teeth first or take their bath first? Let them pick out their clothing and then support and encourage them. As they get older give them more opportunities. They will begin to generate the ideas themselves. You will be surprised by their creativity. Often, their suggestions are very appropriate and yet different from ours.

Allowing children to make decisions not only builds their self-esteem but also gives them the opportunity to be responsible for their choices. Natural consequences are a very powerful learning tool. I’m not suggesting that you let your children make dangerous choices, but they do learn very powerful lessons (that do not need comment from us) when they see the natural consequences of their choices.

The fourth gift is ‘**Permission for Their Feelings**’. Please consider that there are no “bad” feelings. All feelings are valid. How one expresses his feelings may be inappropriate but the feeling is not. Here are some examples: (Do they sound familiar?)

- Your two year—old falls down and skins his knee. You comfort him with “Sshh! It doesn’t hurt! You’re okay now.”
- Your eight year-old is afraid to ride on the roller coaster with his older brother, Jack. You say “You’re a big boy! There’s nothing to be afraid of. Jack rode the roller coaster when he was eight.”

In these situations, the feeling (whether it’s hurt or fear) is valid. And the parent’s response is an attempt to teach the child. But children need parents to accept their feelings and show them ways to accurately express what they are feeling. Let’s look at some other ways to respond to these situations.

- Your two year-old’s knee does hurt and it’s okay to say “I know that hurts. Let’s clean it up and put a band-aid on it.”
- We all have fears. We want our children to think things through and make good decisions. If we give them permission for their fears and encourage them to resolve them, we are telling them they are capable people who can make good decisions. How about a response like, “I get scared of things, too. When you’re ready, you can try again.”

By giving your child permission for his feelings, you are telling him that he is a capable person. Through your guidance he will learn to express those feelings accurately and appropriately.

Children need **Rules**. Dr. Ben Bissell reports that children do better with unfair rules than no clear rules. That isn't an endorsement for unfair rules, but it does give pause to consider the importance of structure. Just as adults want to know what is expected of them and what will happen if they don't do what is expected, children have the same need. When a child is clear on the expectations and consequences of his behavior, he has the opportunity to make a well-informed choice on how to act. That's all well and good, but how do I go about setting up these rules?

It is never too early to begin this structure. With toddlers, it is important to control the environment, to set up a safe place for them to explore. By controlling the environment and not them, you are providing them with a structure. This allows for simple transitions. As they grow they can participate more in how to set up their environment. For example, a two-year old can choose which sweater to wear outside, the three-year old may be able to choose between a coat and sweater, and the four-year old may be able to decide whether a sweater is needed. All of this is a structure that you provide. The implicit rule is that warm clothing is required in cold weather.

As the parents, you certainly have the option to set the rules in your house. However, consider including your children in the setting of rules. At work, we appreciate having input into decisions that affect us and find that we are more invested in the outcome when we have direct input into the goals and procedures for a project. Children are no different. When they have input, they feel more invested in the outcome. Family Meetings are a great tool for establishing rules. As the parent, you should have a clear idea of what rules you feel are needed. In the meeting allow your children to express their concerns and ideas, share your ideas. Brainstorming is a good way to get all the ideas "on the table." As a family, establish a set of house rules. Write them down, keep them simple, don't agree to any rule you can't live with, limit the number to ten or less, and establish consequences when the rules are not followed. Family Meetings are also a great tool for reviewing the rules. You may also have the opportunity to be the "good guy" when one of your children suggests a consequence that is too harsh or a rule that is unfair.

Remember that consistency is very important. Although it is difficult to watch our children suffer with the consequences, the lessons learned are invaluable and will carry them through adulthood. As the parent, your job is to guide your children, provide empathy when "the going gets tough," and make sure the rules are fair and the consequences appropriate. It isn't an easy job and it is always changing, but it is extremely rewarding to see your child making good choices and thinking through the consequences of their behavior. Raising a thinking, responsible child is an invaluable gift to our world.

The sixth gift is **Hugs**: the importance of showing our children they are loved. Physical and verbal expressions of love are fundamental to the healthy development of the child.

“But can’t I spoil my child with too much love?” No, studies have shown that in the first year of life, you can’t hold a child too much. A child begins by learning to trust his world. Each time his parents feed him, change him, or comfort him, he learns that he can trust his world to care for him. As he gets older, he begins to realize that he can communicate his needs. His cries mean different things at different times and his parents learn to recognize what he needs. Now, he begins to realize that not only can he trust his parents, he can also trust himself to communicate his needs or thoughts. As he becomes mobile, he begins to trust his world in other ways. He learns that some things are hard, some are soft, some can hurt, and some can comfort. All of this knowledge gives him the courage to explore and discover for himself.

A fundamental need of all human beings is to belong. We belong in families, and then with our friends. Later we may choose to belong in school, or church, or sports, or scouts. Everyone must belong. Some of us do this by fitting in, others by being different, some by being funny, others by being serious. If children don’t learn to trust in that first year, they may have difficulty trusting others later in life. When a child learns this trust, he is bonded to the family. This experience of bonding is critical to belonging with others as he gets older. He is expanding his circle of important people throughout his life. It starts with parents, and then expands to include other family members, then important people such as neighbors or teachers, then his own friends, and finally a mate and children of his own.

So, the research shows that babies need to be held, but what about older children. Touch is one of the best parenting tools we have. All of us need to be touched. Unfortunately, as children get older we tend to touch them less. Ben Bissell quotes research that says people need at least 4 hugs a day. For older children, touch is a unique way of establishing a connection with the child who is becoming more and more independent. Touch is also a great way to calm down the overexcited child or to redirect the child headed for trouble. Frequently, as parents, we talk too much. I challenge you to find new ways to use less talk and more touch with your children. Let’s stay connected with our children, let’s show them that they are loved.

The seventh gift is: **Laughter and Play**. In our busy lives as adults, we sometimes forget that laughter and play are important in everyone’s life. We can learn from our children’s approach to laughter and play. From the moment they are born, laughter and play are natural activities. Consider that when a young child tosses her toy out of the crib, she is inventing a new way to interact with you. Each time you pick the toy up and put it back in the crib, you are participating in the game. She has engaged you in an activity. Although this is fun for her, it is also a very important lesson in trust. Each time you return the toy, you reinforce for her that the world is a trusting place and that she has the ability to engage people in that world. You also teach her that there are limits by not putting the toy back in the crib when it is time to end the game.

Play could be called the “work” of children. Educators of young children, use “centers” for many of the learning activities in the classroom because they have discovered that much learning occurs when children are playing. The best teachers incorporate play everyday in their lesson plans. This continues even as children move out of the elementary grades into middle and high school. If you could chose between reading a textbook on the internal organs of a frog and actually dissecting a real frog to see the organs, which would you chose?

Laughter has been found to benefit the sick. There have been studies done to explore the importance of laughter when fighting life-threatening illnesses. Did you know that it takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown? So why are we so serious? Maybe it’s time that we listened to our children and learned the value of laughter. Children are learning from everything they do, how about you? I invite you to be more spontaneous and silly with your family and at work. Take that on as a project for a month and see what happens.

Permission for Mistakes, the eighth gift. ‘Everybody’s Human, But Nobody’s Perfect!’ Thank goodness, that certainly makes it easier to be a parent. Or does it? This issue of perfection can sneak up on us at the strangest times. We want the best for our children and we know that some mistakes are very costly. What if we make a mistake that impacts our children forever? It’s too bad that each child doesn’t come with a crystal ball. Maybe it isn’t the mistakes that are the problem, maybe it’s how we look at them.

Making mistakes creates great opportunities for us to teach our children through our actions. Since children learn more by what we do than by what we say, a parental mistake is an opportunity to say “I’m sorry”, “I made a mistake”, “Please forgive me.” We encourage our children to say “sorry” when they’ve done something wrong or quarreled with a friend. If we also acknowledge our mistakes and show our remorse we are demonstrating to our children that this is an appropriate response to a mistake. It is truly the generous person who can acknowledge his own weaknesses.

Giving children permission to make mistakes also gives them permission to learn from their mistakes. The person who does not have permission to make mistakes will either try to cover them up or deny that he has made them. If he is busy “covering up” mistakes, he isn’t looking at the situation and learning from it. Mistakes are great opportunities to learn what works and what doesn’t.

When we encourage our children to try new things, to acknowledge their accomplishments, we foster success.

In his video, *Building Self-Esteem: The Ten Gifts to Give Your Child*, Dr. Ben Bissell says that children can handle **The Truth**. He also suggests that if we don’t tell them the truth, we are teaching them that they are weak and can’t handle the truth. Dr. Bissell talks about death and explaining it to young children. When someone dies, he believes that we should tell children that the person has died. If we tell a child that someone has

gone to sleep, the child may be fearful of going to sleep or if we say that the person went away, the child will wonder when the person is coming back.

There are so many areas where we aren't truthful with our children. And we have to consider their age and maturity. It is also important to understand their question. Keeping it simple is also a good rule. It is best to answer questions when they are asked. But sometimes it is hard because the question surprises us and we don't always 'think quickly on our feet'. It's okay to say, "I'm not sure, can we discuss that later" or "I'm not sure, what do you think?" Earlier we discussed the value in giving permission for mistakes. This is an opportunity to show your child that you don't have all the answers but are willing to discuss the questions and work out solutions. By telling your child the truth, you also tell him that you trust him to tell you the truth. Knowing that you share that bond of trust helps to give him the last gift: the **Freedom** he needs to blossom and grow.

Information taken from Building Self Esteem: The Ten Gifts to Give Your Child by Dr. Ben Bissell.